

**THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE TEACHER-  
PRINCIPAL RELATIONSHIP IN THE  
IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF THE UNITED STATES**

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### ABSTRACT

**The purpose of this article is to examine the effects and affect of schools maintaining positive and healthy relationships between principals and teachers, and to delineate those factors that facilitate and contribute to student academic success. Consequently, the purpose of the study will be threefold: 1) Examining school climate and culture phenomena germane to the development of substantive principal-teacher relationships; 2) Identifying those principal-teacher relational components that foster and affect teacher performance, and; 3) Analyzing the overarching effects of the building and maintenance of substantive principal-teacher relationships on student academic achievement. Furthermore, it is the intent of the present study to hone in on these factors and report findings as one method of improving overall success for the nation's schools at large.**

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The purpose of this article is to discuss the effects and affect of schools maintaining positive and healthy relationships between principal and teachers. We attempt to describe those factors that facilitate and contribute to student academic success.

The principal occupies an important position in the school building. As the leader of a group of professional, certified teachers, and the coordinator of a cadre of classified personnel, the principal establishes important relationships with the staff (Drake, 1992). If education is the major foundation for the future strength of this country (A Nation At Risk, 1983), then teachers—as they come from various backgrounds—must be the cornerstone. Likewise, as schools continue to evolve and as shifts in the demographics of populations continue to occur nationally, there is a need and a call for different relationship paradigms to assist in the proper guidance of those we place in the classrooms. These new paradigms will be marked with servant leaders who empower as opposed to delegate; builds trust rather than demands loyalty; and instead of just hearing and leading from the head, seeks to understand and leads from the heart (DeSpain, 2000).

Principal-teacher relationships vary greatly among schools and even among teachers at the same school. Furthermore, those relationships affected student achievement (Walsh, 2005). This phenomenon occurs because teachers who see principals as facilitators, supporters, and reinforcers for the jointly determined school mission rather than as guiders, directors, and leaders of their own personal agenda are far more likely to feel personally accountable for student learning (McEwan, 2003).

Across America, both principals and teachers alike have to contend with matters such as student discipline. The principal is endlessly involved in dealing with discipline problems, but his role is somewhat different from that of the teacher. Yet in many respects, the teacher and the principal work as a team on major discipline problems (Kritsonis, 2000). Parental issues are another area of great concern, especially during these times when parents demand schools adequately prepare their children (Cotton & Wiklund, 2001). And rising accountability standards and adequate yearly progress causes much contemplation among educators (Albritten et al, 2004) among other issues.



It is important for principals and various faculty groups, i.e. teachers, to work together for mutual support. In addition, the manner in which faculty members worked together as a group significantly influenced student outcomes in schools (Wheelan & Kesselring, 2005). Research exists which concludes that some aspects of school social environment clearly make a difference in the academic achievement of schools (Brookover et. al., 1978).

The literature is replete with theories and studies that address the role of the principal in providing school leadership. An emerging body of literature, though, is focusing on the importance of principal-teacher relationships, rather than merely leadership styles or behaviors (Walsh, 2005). Principals have the ability to improve teacher perceptions overall by simply attending to fundamental components inherent in quality relationships. As teachers begin to feel better about themselves and what their collective missions are as a result of significant interactions with their principals, they become more effective in the classroom.

Student achievement enters into the realm of accountability (Albritten et al, 2004). If a school is devoid of successful scores per the established accountability system, principals quickly recognize the urgent need to achieve—sometimes outside of traditional academic standards—success in such a high stakes game. When school climates become cold and teachers perceive principals as suspicious and negative, a reformation has to occur before teachers are willing to modify instruction. But how can principals ever hope to motivate their teaching staff to expand their repertoires of pedagogical skills unless some fundamental relational components have been established (Gimbel, 2003)?

Daily interpersonal interactions of a principal are necessary to garner trust and support from teachers. In schools, this means that, instead of worrying constantly about setting the direction and then engaging teachers and others in a successful march (often known as planning, organizing, leading, motivating, and controlling), the “leader” can focus more on removing obstacles, providing material and emotional support, taking care of the management details that make any journey easier, sharing in the comradeship of the march and in the celebration when the journey is completed, and identifying a new, worthwhile destination for the next march. The march takes care of itself (Sergiovanni 1992).

Faculty groups working together in healthy social environments substantiate the need for relationship development on school campuses. Relationships have many components, both individual and group in nature, which help to sustain them and add value. One of the most important of all the relational components is that of trust. It is essential that school leaders develop the trust factor necessary for teachers to follow and support their efforts. The building and sustaining of one-to-one relationships with teachers via communicative and supportive behaviors is the overarching trust-promoting behavior of the principal (Gimbel, 2003).

Principals can influence the working patterns of teachers by arranging physical space and free time to promote norms of collegiality and experimentation (Wilson & Firestone, 1987). Effective collaboration is not always easy. It brings with it a measure of difficulty and even of discomfort on occasion. Effective collaborations operate in the world of ideas, examining existing practices critically, seeking better alternatives and working hard together at bringing about improvements and assessing their worth. This is



believed to be one of the key challenges for collaborative working and professional development in the future (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

While many reform reports have not addressed this issue, a central question requiring further analysis is how, exactly, principals influence the instructional work of their schools (Wilson & Firestone, 1987), thereby increasing student achievement. By examining the full range of cultural linkages, the principal can become a strong support for effective instruction in a school. Cultural linkages include the system of collectively accepted meanings, beliefs, values, and assumptions that organizational members (teachers) use to guide their regular, daily actions and interpret their surroundings (Wilson & Firestone, 1987).

Essential to keep in mind is the fact that principals are the instructional leaders of their campuses. All effective schools have this as a quality. Principals must fulfill this role (Effective Schools, 2001). And even though shared decision making attributes are present, there are certain leader-imposed and/or leader-directed activities that need to take place. Of these, promoting trust and building relationships in an effort to ultimately achieve student success should be first and foremost in our nation's schools.

Ron Clark, (2003) Disney's 2000 Outstanding Teacher of the Year, says life is all about experiences, the ones you make for yourself and the ones you make for others. As he refers to all students, he continues, guide them as they grow, show them in every way possible that they are cared for, and make special moments for them that will add magic to their lives, motivate them to make a difference in the lives of others, and most important, teach them to love life.

The single factor common to every change initiative is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus leaders must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups—especially with people different than themselves. Effective leaders constantly foster purposeful interaction and problem solving, and are wary of easy consensus (Fullan, 2001).

Information gleaned from this article will provide a conceptual framework for principals and teachers alike. Practitioners in the field of education will be able to apply models of relational components in the development of their respective programs. Positive climates and school culture, which are both conducive to learning and achievement, will begin to synthesize.

If that kind of relationship is being asked of America's teachers in respect to their students, then principals should lead by example and show the same enthusiasm for their teachers. The most successful students undoubtedly are the ones in environments described by Clark. Similarly, the most successful teachers may be the ones inspired by the beautiful relationships developed with their principals, motivating them to do their very best.

Eaker et al (2002) asks, "What is celebrated in schools? What rituals and ceremonies are in place to reinforce what is valued?" In Professional Learning Communities, there is a conscious effort to use the power of celebration to promote the values the school professes to hold dear. The driving engine of the collaborative culture of a PLC is the team.



In conclusion, this article will contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the field by expanding the notion that in order for success to occur on today's school campuses, a shift from the status quo must take place. When positive climates and cultures of family exist on school campuses across this great land of ours, synergy occurs, productivity increases, and students excel. Programs and systems are not the measure of success. Committed and dedicated individuals within systems—engaged in healthy and systemic collaboration as a result of established relationships—that operate said programs are the true measure of success.

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